

האוניברסיטה העברית בירושלים

THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM

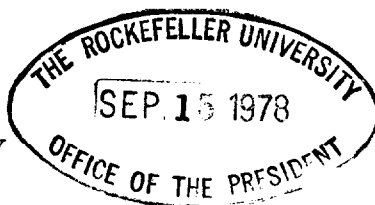
THE INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES
Mount Scopus

המכון ללימודים מתקדמים
חר הצופים


for
RWN
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3rd September 1978

Joshua Lederberg
Rockefeller University
1230 York Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10021
U.S.A.



Dear Joshua,

Since I hadn't heard of your move to the Presidency of Rockefeller University until I received your note of August 15, I should first offer my congratulations - to Rockefeller at least as much as to you.

My half serious reply to your query on how to marry science and policy would be that you start an economics department. My brief excursions into "science-policy" issues convinced me that the methodology of economics, particularly the empirical methods we use, has a lot to offer here. A lot of what we do is necessarily crude and tentative, but I think we at least force the right kinds of issues. On the other hand, I was struck by some of the limitations (to an economist) of "hard" science-based research for policy analysis. For example, the paucity of research on the effects of drugs in human populations, as opposed to laboratory and clinical environments, seems to me a glaring deficiency. For another related example, let me challenge you to tell me what the real-world effects of pollution control efforts have been. If you come up with any competent research results on the question, they will be swamped by the literature on the technology of control or the chemistry of pollutants. I can leave for another time the methodological problems with some of the evaluative work that has been done in fields like this. But perhaps you have already heard about this from people in health economics.

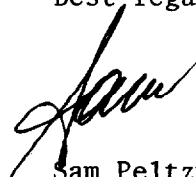
The main advantage of economics in addressing these questions is the social choice perspective we must bring to such problems. The peculiar advantage of marrying this perspective with on-going science research is that economists can't formulate the relevant model very well in ignorance of the underlying technology. So, I guess I am saying that a small group of economists and related types-statisticians, epidemiologists, etc. - with an interest in policy and with ready access to some of the best scientific talent in the world ought to be very productive, or at least provoke much thought in the scientific community.

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So, why hasn't my bright idea caught on? I think it is because the typical academic environment discourages this sort of thing - sociologically more than physically. Since the research would be of primary interest to people outside academic economics, the researcher would probably have little status among academic colleagues and, consequently, ~~face~~ great pressures to build a reputation among them. The trick for you would be to find someone who is both competent and willing to forego the typical academic environment.

Since this is already too long, let's adjourn until that free lunch in New York.

Best regards,


Sam Peltzman ↓
of economics, policy study

P.S. I am sending you under separate cover a vaguely related piece I did for an NSF conference on the Economics of Regulation.

P.S. I will be back in Chicago Sept. 20